

Connections

Connections is a Bozeman-based statewide non-profit organization that assists prisoners before and after release from incarceration.

Founded in 1998 by Casey Rudd, a former inmate, Connections provides mentoring, writes parole plans and helps with transitional services such as housing, jobs, clothes, household items, furniture, transportation and referrals to other agencies. The goal is to reduce the recidivism rate in Montana by helping with a successful re-entry. Connections supports and encourages positive life changes and a drug-free lifestyle.

In 1999, Connections started bringing former prisoners home to live in a house where the organization is headquartered. Over the next four years, 90 prisoners lived there. Of those, 10 went back to prison. All 10 had three chances and all were sent back for drinking. Seventeen of the 90 inmates were American Indians and none of them were returned to prison. At any one time, four to 10 inmates lived in the Connections residence.

The house was self-sufficient with each person paying \$300 a month to live there. This covered rent, utilities, transportation and food. The offenders had to sign up on for rides to and from work and for any meetings or other appointments. They had a one-on-one meeting with Rudd every week where short- and long-term goals were set and they discussed how they are faring. Attendance at a weekly house meeting was mandatory. If a conflict with the meeting time arose, an offender could request another house meeting sooner if needed. Everybody helped with the housework, cooking and yard work.

There was no limit on how long an offender could stay. When they felt they could make it on their own, Connections helped them find a place to live and set it up with furniture and other household items. Most of the inmates stayed at least three months and some for a year. The longer they stayed the better they did on their own.

The house folded in 2003 because a restriction was imposed by probation and parole to only have two felons in the house at one time. There was never an incidence where law enforcement had to be called. The house could not stay open and run the way it had with this restriction. Since then, Connections has only been able to help one offender at a time and they don't have the benefit of the program as it was designed.

Over the years, Rudd believes, Connections has saved Montana taxpayers millions of dollars without any funding or other help from the state. She says the program has been very successful and could help with the overcrowding issue facing the system. Rudd attributes the success of the program to the fact that it was never interested in sending offenders back to prison for minor violations, but instead wanted to help them work remain free as a productive citizen.

(Over)

Rudd says, “We ourselves have been incarcerated and know what its like to come out and feel like you don’t belong. It is extremely important for this population to feel like they belong and are part of society. When they have a vested interest in what’s going on, they do a lot better.”